



Halston (Roy Halston Frowick) (1932-1990)

by Shaun Cole

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The first international fashion superstar, Halston was a master of cut, detail, and finish. He dressed and befriended some of America's most glamorous women. Jackie Kennedy Onassis, Elizabeth Taylor, Babe Paley, Barbara Walters, Lauren Bacall, Bianca Jagger, and Liza Minnelli were just some of the women who wore Halston.

Roy Halston Frowick was born on April 23, 1932 in Des Moines, Iowa, the second son of a Norwegian-American accountant with a passion for inventing. Roy developed an interest in sewing from his mother. As an adolescent he began creating hats and embellishing outfits for his mother and sister. Roy graduated from high school in 1950 then attended Indiana University for one semester. After the family moved to Chicago in 1952, he enrolled in a night course at the Chicago Art Institute and worked as a window dresser.

Frowick's first big break came when the *Chicago Daily News* ran a brief story on his fashionable hats. In 1957 he opened his first shop, the Boulevard Salon, on Michigan Avenue. It was at this point that he began to use his middle name as his professional moniker.

With the help of a lover twenty-five years his senior, celebrity hair stylist André Basil, Halston further developed his career by moving to New York later in 1957. Basil introduced Halston to milliner Lilly Daché, who offered him a job. Within a year he had been named co-designer at Daché, become the new best friend of several fashion editors and publishers, and left Daché's studio to become head milliner for department store Bergdorf Goodman.

When Jacqueline Kennedy attended her husband's inauguration as President of the United States in January of 1961, she was dressed in a jacket by Oleg Cassini and a pill-box hat by Halston. The hat was perfectly suited to Mrs. Kennedy's rather large head. Halston's unadorned and simple creation was copied by women across the world.

Simplicity was the trademark of Halston's creations. By the mid-1970s ethnic peasant looks were being created by all the European designers, but Halston, who hated the fussiness and non-American qualities of such designs, bucked this trend. At a 1973 fashion show at Versailles, where American designers were invited to showcase their work alongside top French designers, Halston stunned the fashion world by the awesome purity of his dresses.

The Halston look was based on minimal and conceptual art principles: cashmere sweaters, shirtwaist dresses, simple elegant pants, rather than "fancy dress." Even his evening wear was glamorous and sexy in its very simplicity. His color palette was ivory, black, and red, but he understood the principle of accent and emphasis, using fuschia, electric blue, and deep burgundy.

Although Halston showed his clothes on stick-thin models, he prided himself on dressing America's Everywoman. In 1978 he told Bernadine Morris, fashion editor of the *New York Times*, "You have to have something for the woman who is overweight--a loose tunic and pants is good because it elongates the body.

You have to have something for the woman with hips--the princess line works for her. Caftans are fine for the woman whose figure isn't perfect."

Halston's best known garment was the Ultrasuede shirtwaist dress that he introduced in 1972. It was one of the most popular dresses in America in the 1970s. Its success stemmed from its plainness, Halston's color choices, and the convenience of being machine washable.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Halston was known not only for his fashions, but also for his participation in New York's nightlife. He was one of *the* faces of the infamous New York nightclub Studio 54. One of the most famous events in the decadent history of Studio 54 was Halston's birthday party for Bianca Jagger in 1977.

In the early 1970s Halston became enamored of a Colombian window dresser named Victor Hugo. Through Hugo he met and befriended his perfect art-world counterpart, Andy Warhol.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Halston threw himself whole-heartedly into a celebrity lifestyle and was frequently featured in the gossip columns. During this period, he was seen partying with his friend Liza Minnelli at the gay holiday resort Fire Island. Patricia Mears reports that he took full advantage of the drugs that were available at the nightclubs he frequented.

The Halston label became part of Norton Simon Industries in 1973. In 1975 he added menswear and perfume to his empire. The perfume was known simply as "Halston" and came in a bean-shaped bottle designed by Elsa Peretti.

However, his partnership with Norton Simon Industries did not bring the riches Halston had hoped it would. Refusing to allow his name to be put on anything he did not design himself, he found it difficult to meet the level of productivity expected of him. His signature was seen on everything from spectacles to the uniforms worn by Avis car rental employees, but he increasingly felt under pressure to produce even more.

In 1982 NSI asked Halston to design a range for the downscale J.C. Penney department stores. He agreed, but the decision had unanticipated, severely negative consequences. Bergdorf's dropped his collections and formerly faithful friends and clients defected to other designers. Halston's relationships with his bosses and colleagues deteriorated until finally he was locked out of his offices after throwing a tantrum.

His career shattered and his health failing, Halston retired from the fashion world. In *Simply Halston*, Steven Gaines notes that "Halston would live the rest of his life in self-imposed exile, an Elba of his own creation. The man who was only as good as the people he dressed ended up not dressing anyone."

Halston was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988. He died of AIDS-related lung cancer in San Francisco, California on March 26, 1990.

Since his death the House of Halston has hired a number of creative directors. Under the direction of Randolph Duke the House became well known once more for evening wear. More recently, under the leadership of Craig Natiello, the House returned to the classic Halston lines (including the Ultrasuede shirtdress) and enjoyed a revival of its reputation. The current designer at the House of Halston is Bradley Bayou, who is known for his extravagant gowns.

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).